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'MIRVing' Soviet Missiles

The Soviets have successfully tested a device for "MIRVing" the advanced model of their intercontinental monster-missile, the SS-9. This is a piece of news that will interest only the old fogeys, nowadays. But it is still news much more important than most.

The basic facts are simple enough. A good many years ago, both the Soviet Union and this country set out to find a way to place more than one nuclear warhead on an intercontinental missile. The U.S. took the road that led to "multiple, independently targeted re-entry vehicles" — the Pentagonese behind the word "MIRV." This required most refined computers. But we had such computers, and it worked.

The Soviets, meanwhile, took another road, probably because of grave weakness in computer technology. They designed a track to be placed inside their missiles. The track carried several warheads. Each warhead was timed to slide down the track at pre-set intervals. Thus the several warheads, being released at different times, would hit different targets. This sounded simple, but it never really worked.

What the Soviets have now got ready for is therefore a true MIRV system, exactly analogous to the U.S. system. It depends upon a highly miniaturized computer aboard the missile itself. The computer independently targets the missile's multiple warheads. There is none of the old un-workable clumsiness. Judging by the carefully analyzed Soviet tests, the system also works admirably.

Concurrently, the Soviets have developed advanced versions of several of their existing missiles. Thus we must now expect the missile-model following on from the SS-9, the equally enormous SS-18, to carry at least three independently targeted war-

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heads. In addition, the new MIRV system will eventually be built into the missile following on the Soviets' smaller but most efficient SS-11, which is called the SS-17.

Nor is this the end of everything that we have to expect. There is no guarantee that the MIRV system already tested is much more than an easy-to-build prototype. For this kind of research and development, the soundest rule is always to make the easy one first. With MIRV itself mastered, the Soviets must be expected to

MIRV the huge SS-18 with at least five if not six warheads. They have plenty of throw-weight for this purpose.

Finally, the alleged protections of the first SALT agreement cease to be worth anything at all to this country after the Soviet MIRV test. In SALT, the main decision was to limit the physical, visible number of deployed inter-continental missiles. There were no limits on substituting better missiles for those previously deployed. There were no limits, either, on improving the previously deployed missiles' warheads, or on multiplying warhead numbers.

The first SALT agreement was hardly signed, when the Soviets conducted the tests showing they were ready to substitute much better missiles

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for many of those they have already. They have now shown, quite decisively, that they also mean to MIRV all their main operational missiles.

These facts mean, in turn, that Soviets have not the smallest intention of "relaxing tensions by ending the arms race." Despite all the prayerful prating on that subject, the meaning of SALT I was quite the opposite. The first SALT agreement really gained the Soviets ample time to gain a huge lead over the U.S.—always assuming the U.S. continuing in the easy, complacent way of recent years.

In the present state of the missile art, there is nothing that can be done to regain the huge former American lead, so thoughtlessly and flaccidly sacrificed. There are still many things that can be done, however, to keep the Soviets from gaining the huge lead that is now within their capabilities. In a way, all these things are "beginning" to be done—as nice, inexpensive, not particularly controversial pilot projects. This is meaningless, however, except that it proves we have the needed technology.

What matters is enough money and thrust of effort to keep even with the Soviets. As of today, Defense Department leaders instead are projecting a potentially decisive Soviet lead in the vital area of strategic weapons with six to eight years. The projection includes the fullest and most optimistic allowances for good results for all U.S. efforts already begun—including some that many senators wish to stop.

So the question is simple. Does the country really want to lie back and let the Soviets gain this kind of lead in strategic power?